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ABSTRACT

The superintendency has historically been vulnerable to high turnover. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the turnover among two groups of Illinois superintendents: those in school districts with severe financial problems, and those in districts without such problems. The purpose was to determine the relationship between superintendent vulnerability (length of time in the school district) and the district's financial condition. Data were obtained from a survey sent to 180 superintendents of school districts that had been placed on Illinois' financial "watch list" and to 177 superintendents of districts never listed. The return rates were 78 and 81 percent, respectively. The current superintendents were asked why their most recent predecessors had left. Findings show that the watch-list districts had significantly more superintendent turnovers. However, respondents reported that the financial condition of the school district was not a factor of superintendents' leaving. The primary reason for leaving the district position was retirement, followed by problems with the board of education. There was no significant difference in reasons for leaving between the two groups of superintendents. Four tables are included. (LMI)

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Superintendent Vulnerability

And the Bottom Line

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Presented at the Annual Meeting

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New Orleans, April 4, 1994

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Superintendent Vulnerability and the Bottom Line

INTRODUCTION

The editor of the American School Board Journal wrote that "no recent year has seen such wholesale changes in superintendencies and other higher school positions as the present year. In the Middle-west there has been a perfect storm of unrest culminating in wholesale resignations, dismissals and new appointments" (Callahan, 1962, p. 54). The year mentioned in this article was 1913. However, it could have been 1983 or 1993. The average length of tenure for superintendents has always been short. A Wisconsin study examined 1,528 superintendents over a 32 year period and found that the median years in one location (as superintendent) was four years. The median length of the career of these superintendents was seven years. Another study showed that 4.6 years in one location was typical with 7.9 years for the career length. A third study found the career to be 7.6 years in length. (Campbell, et al., 1990, p. 249) If the job of superintendent had a wrapper, it might be marked "Hazardous To Your Health," or at least "Dangerous To Your Career."

Years ago, an author who only identified himself as a Vetern Fighter in the Field of American Education made the following statement:

> The point I wish to make is that *nothing, absolutely nothing*, is of more vital consuming interest to the average superintendent of schools than the tremendously important question of whether he will be retained in his present position for the coming year. ... He knows from statistics, observations and experience that he is in the most hazardous occupation known to insurance actuaries. Deep sea diving and structural steel work have nothing on the business of school superintending. Lloyds will insure the English clerk against rain on his week end vacation, but no gambling house would be sufficiently reckless to bet on the chances of re-election for school superintendents three years or even two years ahead. (quoted in Callahan, 1962, p. 205)

Eaton (1990) states that Callahan (in Education and the Cult of Efficiency) implies that a superintendent's vulnerability increases over time. A superintendent makes decisons which may anger or antagonize some people, and these decisions are cumulative. "The superintendent, thus, becomes accountable for all decisions made, both past and present, and even for the policies which he might personally disagree with, but is forced to administer because of board of education policy. This pattern leads to inevitable destruction" (p. 19).

One assumption that is sometimes made about superintendent vulnerability is that superintendents who are employed by school districts

who have severe financial problems are more vulnerable, more prone to be released or leave on their own, than those employed by districts in good financial shape. "Unfortunately, there is no data to compare the financial condition of school districts with superintendent tenure" (Glass, 1993, p. 5). This study examined the turnover rate of superintendents in two groups: those in districts with severe financial problems and those in districts without these problems.

BACKGROUND

In 1985, the State of Illinois decided to formally notify those districts that were having financial problems or were heading in that direction. The criteria used to select the districts were as follows: Based on the prior year's Annual Financial Report, all districts whose Operating Fund Balances to Revenues Ratio was -10% or worse were included (ISBE, 1992, p. 119). This Operating Fund Balance includes the Educational Fund, Operations and Maintenance Fund, Transportation Fund, and the Working Cash Fund (a fund which can be levied and used to provide loans to any other funds that are levied by the district.) Thus, this Ratio divides the sum of the balances in these four funds by the sum of the annual revenues

of these funds, based on a cash accounting basis. (Districts which operate on a modified accural basis are converted to a cash basis for this Ratio.) Districts that fell within this criteria were sent a letter to let them know that they were in financial danger and were offered help by state officials.

The criteria changed in 1988 to that which is in place today: Using the prior year's financial reports, all districts whose Operating Fund Balances to Revenues Ratio was +5% or worse (including all negative Ratios) are notified by the state and are said to be placed on the state's "Financial Watch List." Roland Burris, Comptroller of the State of Illinois in 1990, said that since school districts are required to submit detailed financial information to the state, the state should be able to judge the financial condition of the districts. And, "when fiscal troubles arise, the State Board calls attention to the problem and offers assistance as needed in order to avoid more serious fiscal problems" (Burris, 1990).

Section 1A-8 of the Illinois School Code lists eight criteria for a school to be "in financial difficulty." Although the concept of the Operating Fund Balances to Revenues Ratio is not listed in the School Code to determine financial difficulty, the State Board felt that there was a relationship between this Ratio and three of the criteria listed in the

Code:

(1) The district has for two consecutive years adopted a budget in which budgeted expenditures exceed budgeted revenues and reserves.

(2) The district has issued tax anticipation warrants in anticipation of a second year's taxes when warrants in anticipation of current year taxes are still outstanding.

(3) The district has issued teachers' orders for wages (State of Illinois, 1992, p. 4).

(A district may be removed from the Financial Watch List by achieving a Ratio greater than 5%. Also, districts who have been on the List for two years but have a Ratio above zero will be removed from the List.)

The State Department of Education follows a "progressive attitude in its financial monitoring efforts" (ISBE, 1992, p. 122). First, it encourages districts to take voluntary actions to avoid financial difficulties. If that fails, the districts are placed on the Financial Watch List (after meeting the criteria) as mentioned previously. This early warning notice is given to districts so that they can address the problems that they have. Districts which continue to be on the List for a second year and have a moderate negative Ratio are considered to be on *continued*

watch . Those districts have to submit a written report on their financial condition and detail the actions taken to improve the condition. Districts which have two consecutive years of negative Ratios and a current Ratio of -10% or worse receive a *financial status review* . This review includes a meeting between school personnel and the staff of the State Board. This meeting will determine if the district meets the criteria (as stated in the School Code) for certification as a district "in financial difficulty" and whether the district has taken steps to avoid such a designation. If the district meets the criteria and has not taken sufficient steps to avoid it, the district may be recommended to the State Superintendent and then to the State Board for certification as being "in financial difficulty" (ISBE, 1992, p. 122-124).

METHODOLOGY

As stated in the last section, Illinois changed its criteria for placement on its Financial Watch List in 1988. Each February, the State of Illinois issues a Financial Watch List for the previous fiscal year. At the time of this study, there had been five yearly lists, from FY 1988 through FY 1992 (issued in February, 1993). Out of the 970 school districts in

Illinois, there were 325 *different* school districts which had been placed on these Watch Lists during these years. (Some districts were on the List for more than one year.) According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a random sample of 177 would be sufficient for a 95% confidence level. Questionnaires were sent to 180 superintendents of randomly selected Watch List districts. From those who were surveyed, 141 returned usable questionnaires, for a response rate of 78.3%. A second random sample was chosen from all the other districts in Illinois which had never been on the Watch List during this time. Of the 177 selected, 144 responded for a return rate of 81.4%.

One of the problems in asking superintendents (or anyone) why they have left a position is honesty. Sometimes, understandably, a person does not want to explain why they really left a job. "There is a natural and understandable reluctance for superintendents who have been fired to want to document the reasons for some researcher....It is this last factor, dismissal, that is at the heart of the vulnerability thesis. Alas, it is the most difficult factor to document" (Eaton, p. 29).

This survey asked the current superintendent why the *previous* superintendent left his/her position. This is based on the assumption that the current superintendent knows the real reason why the superintendent

left and is more willing to reveal that reason, under confidential circumstances, than the superintendent who left the district. This researcher, having been a superintendent in two states, knows that he eventually heard from board members and others why his predecessors left, even though the general public may not have known.

The major purpose of this study was to examine superintendent vulnerability, as defined as length of time in a district, as related to the financial condition of the school district. However, the survey also listed several other reasons for which superintendents might leave a district so that the study would not be biased by merely asking whether the superintendent left because of the financial condition of the district.

The data received were subjected to a frequency analysis, a Pearson correlation, and a *t*-test.

RESULTS

The superintendents were asked to state the number of different superintendents their districts had during the period covered by this study. The districts which had been on the Watch List had more superintendents than those districts which had not been on the Watch List.

A *t* -test (Table 1) showed that there was a significant difference between the two groups, using a .05 level.

Place Table 1 about here

In addition to asking the superintendents about the number of different superintendents the district had in the past, they were also asked the reason that the last superintendent before them had left the district. As shown in Table 2, the reason stated most often as "Quite Important" or "Very Important" on a four-point scale was retirement. The second reason stated was the relationship between the past superintendent and the board of education. Of the eight reasons available for selection, the financial condition of the school district ranked sixth.

The superintendents were also asked whether their own background included being a business manager, assistant superintendent for business, or similar position, before becoming a superintendent. Only 5.3% of the superintendents stated that they held this type of position in the past. With so few superintendents holding this position in the past, there was no significant difference between the two groups with respect to this

variable.

Place Table 2 about here

The respondents for the percentages listed in Table 2 include both the Watch List group and the Non-Watch List group. When a *t* -test was used to compare the responses of these two groups with respect to these reasons for leaving the district, there was no significant difference between the two groups for any of the reasons. See Table 3.

Place Table 3 about here

Table 4 shows that there was no significant relationship between the number of different superintendents that a district had and whether the superintendent left because of the financial condition of the district. However, there was a significant relationship between the number of

different superintendents and whether the district was on the Watch List. The more superintendents a district had, the more likely the district was to be on the Watch List.

The correlation results also showed that superintendents who left for promotion to a larger district or for more money also tended to leave for geographic reasons and because of the financial condition of the district. And, there was a significant relationship between those who left because of this financial condition and those who left because of the relationship with the teachers and/or union and because of legal problems.

There was also a significant relationship between those superintendents who left because of these latter two reasons (union and legal problems) and because of their relationship with the board of education. Finally, superintendents who left because of retirement tended not to leave because of their relationship with their boards.

Place Table 4 about here

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

While the Watch List districts had significantly more superintendents during the period covered by this study than did the non-Watch List districts, the superintendents who were surveyed did not think that their predecessors left because of the financial condition of the district. The primary reason for leaving was for retirement. Although Illinois has a new early retirement incentive program, this probably did not affect these past retirements. Since the superintendency is the ultimate public school position, it only makes sense that many superintendents hold this position as the last one before retiring.

The vulnerability of the superintendency probably is evident in the second reason given for leaving--because of the relationship with the board of education. (Of course, this reason could also cause some of the superintendents to retire a few months early, too.) But, the important finding in this study is that there was no significant difference in the reasons for leaving between the Watch List superintendents and those who were superintendents in districts which were not on the Watch List.

Although a background in school finance is important to a superintendent, hardly any of the superintendents had been a business manager (assistant superintendent for business, etc.). While the Watch

List districts superintendents had 6.4% with this business manager background and the non-Watch List districts had 4.2%, there was no significant difference between the two groups. This shows that even though school finance is important, not many administrators go through the business manager position to become superintendents. (This seems to be consistent with other studies showing superintendents coming from the high school principalship and other central office positions; Sharp, 1989 and Sharp, 1991).

Several of the reasons for leaving the district were significantly related, and for a good reason. Superintendents who left for promotion to a larger district or for more money also tended to leave for geographic reasons and because of the financial condition of the district. These superintendents, seeking a higher paid position, probably did seek positions in specific geographic areas where pay was higher and where the districts were in better financial shape, allowing the districts to pay a higher salary.

Also, superintendents who left their districts because of their relationships with the boards of education tended to also leave because of the relationships with the teachers' union and because of legal problems. Again, these reasons are logically related as problems with the union

often lead to legal problems and, when the board supports the union, problems with the board of education.

Leaving because of the financial condition of the district was also related to problems with the union and legal problems. This also makes sense because superintendents who are unable to grant salary increases which the union feels are appropriate will often have problems with that union and even legal problems, including arbitration and fact finding.

This study wanted to see if districts with severe financial problems had a higher turnover of superintendents due to these problems. The results show that the Watch List districts had more superintendents than did the non-Watch List districts, and this difference was statistically significant. However, when an examination was made of the reasons that these superintendents left their districts, the financial condition of the district was not a significant factor. It may just be that districts with severe financial problems tend to attract and hire superintendents who are more prone to leave than those hired in districts with a more stable financial condition.

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TABLE 1

t-TEST FOR COMPARISON OF DISTRICTS

ON WATCH LIST WITH THOSE NOT ON WATCH LIST:

NUMBER OF DIFFERENT SUPERINTENDENTS

Group	Mean	Stand. Dev.	*t*	Significance	
Not on List	1.54	0.61	-2.9473	0.0035	S
On Watch List	1.82	0.95			

TABLE 2

IMPORTANCE OF REASONS FOR

LAST SUPERINTENDENT LEAVING DISTRICT

Reason	Quite Important + Very Important
Retirement	53.5%
Relationship With Board of Education	51.9%
Other (various responses)	32.3%
Relationship With Teachers/Union	30.4%
Promotion to Larger District or More Money	28.9%
Financial Condition of the District	22.2%
Legal Problems	15.1%
Geographic	14.8%

Note: The responses were on a four-point scale: Not Important, Somewhat Important, Quite Important, and Very Important. The last two responses were added for the percentages above. Although respondents were asked to specfic what "Other" meant, if chosen, very few did so.

TABLE 3

t-TEST FOR COMPARISON OF DISTRICTS

ON WATCH LIST WITH THOSE NOT ON WATCH LIST:

REASONS FOR LEAVING DISTRICT

Reason/Group	Mean	Stand. Dev.	*t*	Significance
Promotion to larger district or money money				
Not on List	1.78	1.23	-0.2711	0.7867
On List	1.84	1.26		NS
Geographic				
Not on List	1.49	0.90	-0.0048	0.9962
On List	1.49	0.95		NS
Retirement				
Not on List	2.56	1.44	-0.6422	0.5216
On List	2.70	1.44		NS
Financial condition of the district				
Not on List	1.67	0.86	-1.6534	0.1005
On List	1.94	1.12		NS

Table 3, continued

Relationship with board of education				
Not on List	2.71	1.24	1.1426	0.2549
On List	2.48	1.29		NS
Relationship with teachers/union				
Not on List	2.01	1.01	0.6179	0.5376
On List	1.91	1.07		NS
Legal Problems				
Not on List	1.58	1.03	0.7802	0.4366
On List	1.46	0.88		NS
Other				
Not on List	1.80	1.22	-0.2489	0.8044
On List	1.88	1.30		NS

Note: The number listed as means refer to a four-point scale as follows: 1=Not Important, 2=Somewhat Important, 3= Quite Important, and 4=Very Important. A .05 level of signficance was used.

TABLE 4

CORRELATION STUDY

ON SUPERINTENDENT VULNERABILITY

The Two Variables	Pearson r	Significance
The number of different superintendents AND the superintendents leaving because of the financial conditions of their districts	-0.14714	0.0733 NS
The number of different superintendents AND whether districts were on the Watch List	0.17384	0.0033 S
Superintendents who left for promotion to a larger district or for more money AND those who left for geographic reasons	0.54578	0.0001 S
Superintendent who left for promotion to a larger district or for more money AND those		

Table 4, continued

who left because of the financial conditions		0.0026
of their districts	0.24583	S
Superintendents who left because of the financial conditions of their districts AND left because of their relationships with		0.0002
the teachers and/or unions	0.30102	S
Superintendents who left because of the financial conditions of their districts AND		0.0153
left because of legal problems	0.20183	S
Superintendents who left because of retirement AND left because of their relationships with their boards of		0.0001
education	-0.36861	S
Superintendents who left because of the		

Table 4, continued

relationships with their boards of education AND left because of the relationships with teachers and/or unions	0.59712	0.0001 S
Superintendents who left because of the relationships with their boards of education AND left because of legal problems	0.41608	0.0001 S

Note: A .05 level of significance was use. For variables other than "the number of different superintendents," responses were on a four-point scale with "1" being Not Important and "4" being Very Important.